

Conference Paper

Intellectual Humility in Public Discussion

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Abstract

In this article, the authors analyze intellectual humility as a cognitive and a communicative virtue. Public discussions on controversial topics – religious and scientific debates included – are becoming an increasingly important part of social life. They are viewed as important for the future of democratic societies as political procedures traditionally associated with democracy. In order to make a public dialogue more beneficial for the society it is essential to understand what obstacles may arise in its way and what the possible strategies to overcome them are. One of such behavioral strategies is intellectual humility. Humility has a long history of being recognized as a virtue. The authors analyze its potential for contemporary societies, undertake etymological analysis and compare intellectual humility to other associated intellectual virtues and vices such as open-mindedness and intellectual hubris. The core point of this article is that prejudiced cognition is bound to become limited or outright false, whereas intellectually humble research and dialogue efforts lead to true understanding – both cognitive and interpersonal. Intellectual humility is perceived as an especially valuable asset for any researcher, administrator or public speaker.

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Modern public communications as a network of various open institutions and social practices are actively shaping mass consciousness and its numerous manifestations. Although contemporary mind is often characterized as mostly secular, we can see a lot of successful attempts to influence it via social and information channels from major religious confessions. One cannot blame their activists for irrationalizing the discourse: appealing to faith, emotions and intuitive insights of their target group. On the contrary, their arguments are often quite rational – if we understand rationality as a human intellectual ability to find non-contradictive reasons for certain ideas and representations.

Modern studies on religion in democratic societies underline the increasing influence of public discussions, which are becoming nearly as important as other democratic

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procedures. They are more than just ways to define winners and losers in a competition for power: they are a mechanism to form public opinion on socially important questions or even to produce a decent consensus. Public discussions are an essential tool of this process, it would be impossible to make democracy stable unless this mechanism functioned well. Moreover, these discussions turn out as important as democratic procedures and their outcomes. To be more exact, they allow groups of people to control state power and make it more accountable.

However, even in modern public discussions their participants when faced with hard questions are often trying to ignore them, reject or marginalize their opponents' views. This problem remains acute both in political debate (when combating sides are trying to highlight intellectual flaws of each other) and in unsuccessful attempts to establish a religious dialogue (when orthodox dogmas and confessional arrogance become an impediment to mutual understanding). D. Uzlaner – a well-known Russian specialist in religious studies – formulates a number of arguments aimed to prove the social importance of a dialogue between science and religion. He underlines its significance for stability of modern constitutional democratic societies including Russia [12]. But even scholars who claim to be objective often manifest a strong and uncompromised need to protect the ideas they perceive as "their". Sometimes it makes them ignore significant arguments against their positions and have no empathy for their opponents' views.

Axiological problems of value development become epistemological tasks of intellectual communications management. A part of political elite and a part of society have already recognized that state power cannot be the only source of information and its interpretation. Dialogue-oriented information culture is developing rapidly and inevitably. It is going to replace the monologue-oriented form of information space organization. With Internet development, a great number of people can now practically "make themselves heard" – but in order to avoid the cacophony of their voices we need certain conditions to organize a functional dialogue instead of a superficial one.

To find a successful solution for effective interaction in public sphere one can use forms and methods developed by religion itself. They could lead to a more harmonious integration of rational intersubjectivity of public discourse and subjectivity of religious beliefs. Intellectual humility is one of such forms of attitude to knowledge. It has historically developed within Christian culture and can prove beneficial for contemporary public dialogue between religious and secular organizations. In our opinion, intellectual humility is psychologically relevant in such a dialogue compared to a blind conviction in one's own exclusive knowledge of the truth – intellectual hubris.

Intellectual humility is acceptance that we do not and cannot know absolutely everything, and that what we do know – we should not use selfishly. Instead, we should admit that we can err in our blind belief of how much we understand and seek wisdom we lack nowadays.

The problem of humble acceptance and bold denial has great significance in Christianity inheriting Old Testament traditions. It takes ontological perspective in this context, hence it is exactly from this point that the fall of man follows when Adam and Eve deny God's will. All Biblical history, deeds of saints and prophets can be perceived as a choice between accepting God's will, people and sins or struggling against them. It's a common place in Bible to describe a human being as spiritually and physically weak and not self-sufficient: he is taken hostage by diseases, old age and death, he makes mistakes, feels fear, falls into illusions, he sins. As a result, he does not have absolute freedom and independence. Whether he wants it or not, he is doomed to obey: "Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?" (Romans 6:16, English Standard Version). At the same time, people have a freedom of will and, on the one hand, can resist God, His laws and commandments, on the other hand, people can resist other people, passions, sins and even Satan.

It is noteworthy that Biblical texts as well as ancient philosophers' texts contain a lot of synonyms denoting submission and struggle against it. To describe submissive human behavior these texts use such words as "slavery", "obedience", "modesty", "humility", "service", "docility". Despite the fact that the antagonism between humility and hubris (as a ground for rebellion against God), antagonism between slavery and freedom has deep roots and influences the development of Christian and world ethics, thought, culture and science, there are still no consensus on the unified terms to describe this problem. Various terms used by scholars for its descriptions are often synonyms – with rare exceptions they denote the same meanings.

European philosophy (as once antic philosophy was) is still interested in studying humility in all spheres of life: spiritual, moral, public, scientific, artistic, etc. Irrespective of schools and directions, many philosophers find it obvious that there is always something people have to submit to, something they have to accept in order to harmonize their private and their public life. In this sense, humility draws borders of private and public life. Descartes, for instance, offers "precise and simple rules which – if followed strictly – will prevent taking the false for the true and help the mind without excessive effort truly understand everything it can reach" [5]. At first glance, Descartes does

not explicitly say anything about humility, but in fact, his method implies that its user consciously chooses to obey “precise and simple rules” which is a part of definition of humility that we use. It is also worth mentioning that speaking of consciously abandoning moral and intellectual freedom Descartes introduces a term “vicious humility” [5] which describes human weakness, inability of people to be self-sufficient and as a consequence of their conscious submission to other people.

Taking into account that terms denoting the idea connected to conscious submission of a person to circumstances, other people’s will or a certain system of values are synonyms, we can use the word “smirenje” (humility). Its etymology shows how a person consciously compares themselves with a “mera” (measure) from Old Slavonic “smeriti” (to measure) - “umeriti” (to restrict), “umyagchiti” (to mitigate), “podaviti” (to submit). At the same time being close to the word “mir” (world, peace) in folk etymology, the word “smirenje” (humility) reflects all the outer world reality in its variety: natural world with its laws, human world with its norms and values [6]. It is also worth noting that the word “mir” in the Russian language has another meaning apart from “world”: it can also mean “consent, peaceful state, absence of enmity, conflict, war”, which allows us to accentuate the freedom to choose humility compared to submission that can only be mechanical and constrained.

This network of meanings of the word “smirenje” (humility) is a serious argument in favor of using it as a term. This term expresses a notion that contains a wide variety of human behaviors that can be described as “conscious obedience”. We can compare this term to the term “skromnost” (modesty) which has a much narrower meaning. The number of meaning covered by the term “smirenje” (humility) is also directly linked to its etymology: to what and how a person brings themselves to a “mera” (measure), to which circumstances and values they submit only depends on the person.

Humility as a virtue is aimed against such vices as arrogance, vanity, conceit, egoism, snobbism and smugness which are summarized in Christian notion of hubris – a sin understood as “misplaced pride”. Intellectual humility manifests itself in awareness that you can always be prone to intellectual mistakes. This makes a thinker more open-minded and able to review their position, less inclined to be blindly sure of their knowledge and more respectful to other people’s views. It also allows people not to be afraid of intellectual controversies.

There is no stable conceptual understanding of humility yet. For instance, mass beliefs studies on intellectual humility reveal such components as open-mindedness, absence of fear to admit and correct a mistake and to listen to all parties involved [11]. These epistemic virtues heavy with axiological implications do not only concern

intellectual debates, but also have high theoretical importance in various philosophical [2], psychological [9] and even psychotherapeutic projects (Schwab, 2012).

The history of philosophy hardly helps to find the undoubtedly true definition of what humility is. David Hume described humility as a feeling of shame whereas Thomas Aquinas viewed it as a restriction to exorbitant vanity. Modern authors sometimes associate humility with low self-esteem. However, other authors note that in fact it indicates not a lower self-esteem, but a more precise one. It is important to highlight that intellectual humility is linked to a lack of obsession with one's social status demonstrated by the legendary teachers of humanity – Jesus and Socrates. For Jesus humility does not mean taking care of his divine status, it means taking care of something much greater than himself impersonating absolute love of the creator towards sinful humanity. Socratic humility manifested itself in ignoring social evaluation and being passionate about preserving the truth and his one virtue in the face of eternity.

Modern philosophers define intellectual humility as a propensity to owning one's intellectual restrictions. The most distinctive feature is the necessity to be attentive to one's style of thinking and the ability to manage one's intellectual potential as well as a feeling of dignity [13]. In our opinion, humility is not simply opposed to hubris. It is a virtue being in a median position between the extremes of arrogance on the one hand and servility on the other hand.

An intellectually humble person does not over-estimate their beliefs, but at the same time does not under-estimate them. Instead, they believe their views to be appropriate to their epistemic status and intellectual capacity. Intellectually humble people do not repress or cover their vulnerability, they see their weaknesses as sources of personal development and use arguments as opportunities to develop and specify their ideas.

Naturally, humble people are more open-minded, they can quicker resolve their controversies because they admit that their opinion is not the final word on the subject. Intellectual humility is based on the ability to prefer the truth to the social status. Humble people see personal growth as a value in itself – not as a means of climbing higher up the social ladder. The Internet and social media have created an impression of boundless and easily accessible knowledge. It creates an illusion that we have wisdom, but we miss a lot of information if we are self-centered and only care about our place in this world. Each time we think there is a threat to our social and epistemic status we invest great effort into defending our existing views. This creates a risk of losing a new channel of knowledge and a curious unselfish truth-seeker in ourselves.

An intellectually humble person will admit that knowledge depends on the contributions of other people expressing gratitude and acknowledgement. This in its turn, will promote a collective quest for truth. Thus, intellectual humility is both individual and interpersonal disposition towards unprejudiced and open-minded treatment of others.

By contrast, overconfidence manifests itself in intellectual hubris and will devalue others' views and beliefs which may spur conflicts and misunderstanding. Intellectual hubris makes people vane and unduly self-confident. This eventually leads to the narrow-mindedness of their views. Such intellectual disposition will also lead to denial of cognitive contributions of other people and undermine collective efforts to obtain true knowledge. A person can be considered intellectually arrogant if they do not want to or cannot change their beliefs even in the face of obvious counter-arguments.

Understanding intellectual humility as an axiologically meaningful epistemic virtue can be an alternative to intellectual hubris in many controversial questions in public discussions. Humility does not lead a person to withdraw into themselves and to feel uncertain because it is closely connected to such cognitive qualities as open-mindedness, curiosity and honesty. Cultivating intellectual humility can lead to a more constructive participation of religious organizations in solving social and humanitarian problems, because it creates a level playing field for all actors lifting the burden of a claim for final truth monopoly.

How much would we advance in mutual understanding if disputing parties were trying to admit their cognitive restraints for the sake of collectively discovering truth? Is it possible in a dialogue where participants realize opinions, strengths and contributions of other people being at the same time ready to admit their own strengths and weaknesses and being ready to be open-minded and able to learn from others? It is quite possible that humility – both intellectual and emotional – will not only enrich our understanding of what makes life meaningful and useful, but will also lead to a better social life.

While accepting humility as a value we do not claim we know the right answers to the questions above. Promoting humility as an intellectual norm has only recently become an object of systematic studies. Nevertheless, based on scant empiric research and certain tendencies in speculative arguments we can express several ideas. Firstly, humility has a positive correlation with a number of virtues such as mercy, honesty, gratitude and cooperation. Secondly, humble people experience less negative psychological symptoms and report better health. This may be due to the fact that humility is linked to such health factors as the ability to forgive and gratitude. Thirdly, humility correlates with success in certain spheres of life – especially connected to management

and cognition. Finally, humble people are simply perceived by others as kinder, more appealing people.

If in science necessity is the mother of invention, humility is definitely its father. Scientists should be ready to abandon their theories in favor of newer, more precise explanations in order to keep up with constant innovations. Many scientists who had made important discoveries early in their career later became trapped by their ego and could not accept newer true findings. Intellectually humble scientists reap more benefits from knowledge and intuition than those who lack this virtue. Groundbreaking discoveries made in young age bring certain impediments along with the world recognition: they make a further pursuit for truth more difficult because one becomes restrained by their fame. It is only a humble love for truth that can remove these obstacles. It allows to search for true knowledge despite social evaluation.

Scientific cognition necessarily requires a certain measure of humility. This humility manifests itself in self-discipline, brining ones activities to order, incessant scrupulous labor. Despite occasional sudden insights, it takes a long period of painstaking work to make them possible. According to P. Chaadaev, "...all powers of mind, all its means of cognition are only based on its obedience. The more it obeys, the stronger it is. And there is only one question for human mind: what to obey?" [1]

Humility in scientific cognition is not only necessary for a scientist to organize their work properly – it is also necessary to serve the search for truth which is the only goal of scientific cognition as it should be. A scientist should search for objective truth. They should not manipulate the results of their research in accordance with their wishes, dominant world picture, public opinion or state ideology. A search for truth presupposes humility: the very concept of unattainable absolute truth constantly reminds that even if some knowledge seems well-proved and consistent it is still not the absolute and final truth itself. Every knowledge should only be perceived as incomplete and hence open for criticism, revision and discussion.

Intellectual humility manifesting itself in acceptance of our own cognitive restraints, professional discipline and search for truth is closely connected to scientific skepticism and a critical analysis of both recognized scientific theories and one's own insights. There are no insurmountable obstacles between scientific and religious cognition because intellectual humility is characterized by prioritizing knowledge itself and pursuit for truth which allow us to stop caring of our social image and status and to weaken the feeling of self-importance for a while. According to Paul the Apostle: "Knowledge puffeth up, but love edifieth" (Corinthians 8:1, American Standard Version). Love for knowledge edifieth in humility.

Knowledge comes through various channels that can be blocked by incessant care about one's own social status. The one who keeps these channels open, succeeds in obtaining knowledge. This process requires that we be able to listen to and to hear others without putting too much effort into comparing our knowledge to newly acquired knowledge in order to express our superiority. This, in its turn, requires open-mindedness to admit that our personal opinions are to a certain extent fallacies.

George Edward Moore demonstrated intellectual humility when during his lectures on the concepts of truth at Cambridge he sometimes critically mentioned what he had said before on the subject treating those statements as if they had been made by some other philosopher and require correction. He also sometimes announced that he was going to proceed to another step of his argumentation because he had not known how to do that in a logically consistent way before. G.E. Moore did not seem concerned with his professor status because he was deeply concerned with finding the truth. His love for knowledge overcame his care for status and this intellectual humility made him one of the most prominent philosophers of the 20-th century.

Being intellectually humble does not mean being servile. It does not imply ignoring one's social status completely, repenting one's real or imaginary flaws and it does not imply a pressing need for a religious blessing either.

It would be plausible to assume that differences in statements describing the nature and values of humility are often created by differences in moral and religious approaches. If it is true, it would take special conditions to define the contexts in which religious, moral and scientific conceptions of intellectual humility form. To define these contexts it is important to clarify how intellectual humility is connected to other intellectual virtues such as intellectual courage, objectivity, intellectual honesty, justice, mercy, independence, persistence and practical wisdom. All of these virtues are directly related to humility and can even be seen as one system of intellectually positive characteristics, but understanding of each of them depends on its relations to the rest of these virtues.

An important question beyond the scope of this article is the practical problem of developing intellectual humility. How can we bring up intellectually humble or – in a broader sense – intellectually virtuous people? What disciplines should they learn to develop these qualities? Humanitarian and social educators show the importance of collective imagination and social design in order to prove that various identities (national, racial, religious, gender) are to a large degree constructs and even consequences of involuntary fallacies.

In solving a practical problem of intellectual humility development the task of cultivating respect to the Other is the most important one. There are several behavioral and relation models manifesting this respect: open-mindedness, being ready to consider different points of view, an ability to involve the maximum number of interested parties in a decision-making process. We should not underestimate our obvious or yet undiscovered prejudices: we all have certain predispositions, their development can be depicted as concentric circles expanding from our families to the rest of humanity that lives and acts in different, unknown to us ways. It is very important to monitor our own prejudices and see the limits of our perception, blind spots of our intellectual vision.

For instance, it is quite possible to discover one's unconscious associations that our brain has accumulated, using various association tests. Thus, everybody can learn of their hidden prejudices on such things as a race, religion, politics, education, nationality or sexual orientation. The aim of this is not to provoke guilt, but to become aware of the possible influence of these prejudices on our everyday life.

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